

Virtuality in Organizations and Communities

The push and pull provided by information technology and rapidly changing business demands have led to virtual work becoming increasingly important in organizations today. Virtual work can take the form of geographically distributed teams in supply chain to telecommuting to global project development teams. Virtuality is also an increasingly common characteristic of work communities, where individuals become part of groups and/or organizations that have no physical co-location, and often do not meet each other, except for virtual encounters. As managers struggle to adjust to new and evolving realities in light of the September 11 terrorist attacks (e.g., time-consuming travel constraints, the need to have distributed and redundant resources), we expect these innovative ways of organizing to continue to grow.

Managing, working, and living in this information-rich and rapidly changing environment presents major challenges. This mini-track focuses on challenges presented by geographical, temporal, and cultural distribution among individual working together in organizations and communities of work.

We have three papers in this mini-track which investigate different challenges of virtuality. First, Bradner, Mark, and Hertel explore the influence of virtuality on work teams. They present a survey-based study of the effects that team size has on geographically distributed teams within a large, multi-national manufacturing organization. They find differences between small and large teams in their work practices and in their use of technology. The study finds that members of smaller teams participate more actively on their team, are more committed to their team, are more aware of the goals of the team, are better acquainted with other team members' personalities, work roles and communication styles, and report higher levels of rapport compared to members of larger teams. However, larger teams are more conscientious in preparing meeting agendas compared to smaller teams. Consistent with their emphasis on coordination, larger teams adopt technology to support the coordination of asynchronous work, while smaller teams adopt collaboration technology.

Next, Bauer, Koeszegi and Wolkerstofer present research conducted at the organizational level. They explore the emergence and evolution of virtual corporations. Using 70 responses from companies in the engineering and data processing industries, the authors use quantitative analysis to examine the adoption of virtual structures. They find that there is only a slight difference in the adoption of virtual structures in different industries (that have different environmental factors relating to innovation and dynamism). The authors further suggest that either it is empirically difficult to measure the creation and evolution of virtual structures, or that current conceptions of virtual corporations are inadequate, thereby pointing to a need for fundamental conceptual clarification and theory building.

Finally, Yates, Orlikowski, and Woerner investigate the use of communication technology to facilitate collaborative work in a distributed organization. Specifically, they study the nature and use of conversational threads in the electronic mail exchanges of members of one organization over a year. They find that members engage in a range of threading activity to establish and maintain continuity, coherence, and coordination in their collaborative work over time. The authors further classify the threads as: simple, concurrent, and compound. Each of these types of threads has a different function in facilitating conversation and coordinating distributed activities over time and across distance.

There is a growing importance of virtuality in organizations. While presenting many potential benefits, there is much research needed to better understand the resulting benefits and challenges of this work environment. We are very excited about this set of papers and hope they stimulate additional investigation in this area.